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ABSTRACT

A study of the growth of seventh grade students' writing ability after targeted discussions of children's literature was based on the assumption that active comprehension of a distinctive model of literature would provide an awareness of the structure of narrative prose that would transfer to the student's own writing. Eight students participated in the study. A "listen-discuss-write" teaching procedure was used, in which the students read a literary selection, asked and answered questions, and wrote stories of their own. Development of writing ability was measured with a holistic scoring method. Preliminary analyses of the students' writing samples appeared to confirm the listen-discuss-write technique as a means of fostering the growth of writing skills for the participants. Greater improvement was shown for less able writers, but good writers also appeared to profit from targeted discussion of narrative elements. (Scoring profiles for three writing samples are appended.) (FL)

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The Development of Children's Composition
Following Targeted Discussions of a Distinctive
Literature Selection

A Paper Presented at the First Annual
Meeting of the American Reading Conference

Sarasota, Florida

December 4, 1980

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This paper presents a status report of a continuing study of the growth of children's composition after targeted discussions of children's literature. The assumption underlying the study is that active comprehension of a distinctive model of literature provides an awareness of the structure of narrative prose which transfers to the student's own writing. Guided verbal interaction focused on story elements brings about deeper understanding of prose construction.

Rationale for the Approach.

Teachers of language arts are sometimes caught between polar ideas:

- (1) that writing is learned behavior-- frequently inconstant and laborious, and
- (2) that creativity in written expression should not be stifled by excessive formal instruction.

A middleground is suggested by Schiller (1970), Moore (1978), Hillerich (1979), and Blake and Spennato (1980) who propose that teaching the art of writing should occur within a conceptual framework often sequenced over specifically designated time frames. Most of these proponents of structured teaching of composition suggested a process which includes orientation and pre-writing experiences, idea production and generation, revision and editing, and product sharing.

If carefully sequenced instruction can facilitate the development of children's writing, can analysis of a worthy literary model, as a part of the instructional process, increase student awareness of story elements? Through discussion of author intent and style, can children transfer knowledge of literary models to their own creative writing? These questions are basic to the proposed teaching strategy which begins with appreciation of a literary work and continues with targeted discussion of story elements followed by student writing activity periods. It is assumed that:

- (1) students can grasp the elements of composition by observing the patterns employed in an excellent model, and
- (2) that higher order questioning during discussion permits transfer to the student's original work.

Support for the procedure is found in discussion of active comprehension by Singer (1978) and Pearson and Johnson (1978) who emphasize the use of modes of questioning which are directed toward problem solving and which place a premium on satisfying reader curiosity. Lundsteen (1974) also advocates group problem solving discussions in which the process is controlled but not the specific content. In this procedure questions are formed to elicit transfer of ideas. Lundsteen believes that this mode of questioning helps children to learn, "to be persistent, to feel free to be original and open minded, to empathize, to think of the 'whys' and to communicate interactively." McConaughy (1980) cites evidence that children in the early and middle grades may need the help of specific probe questioning in order to focus on higher levels of story comprehension.

Relating reading comprehension to the structure of written prose is not automatic for individuals of any age. Gage(1978) suggests that students face difficulty in thinking of writing as a rhetorical process if they have not been taught to read rhetorically. He suggests that current reading comprehension instruction makes no distinction between meaning and significance, and that students unable to make the distinction have difficulty establishing intent in their own writing. The procedure described in this study purports to help children to make these distinctions in order to develop more fully their own composing styles.

The Writing Group.

Subjects for this study are a group of eight seventh grade youngsters at

St. Benedict's School, Richmond, Virginia. The group of four girls and four boys are volunteers who agree to "keep up with any work missed" in the English classes from which they were excused to attend the writing workshop. Although no attempt was made to control intelligence or creativity variables, the group represents an ability range from gifted to low average and includes one diagnosed disabled reader. The students have previously had extensive instruction in traditional English grammar and literature, but have had few opportunities for creative writing. Socioeconomically, they represent the range of the white middle class in the Richmond, Virginia area.

The Procedure.

The procedure used to integrate comprehension of the literary model with writing performance employs the comprehension model of Goodman and Burke (1972) as an organizing format for questions. Verbal interaction strategies patterned after Ruddell's (1974) model elicit observations about story characters, character development, events, plot, and theme. Schiller's (1970) model for teaching the art of writing forms the basis for the corresponding writing activities following discussion sessions. Discussion periods of 15-to-20 minutes are followed by writing periods of 15-to-20 minutes. As the writing progresses, oral discussion is brief and informal, and writing is sustained for longer periods. No session exceeds 50 minutes in duration. Two of the sessions were videotaped for specific analysis.

The literature stimulus for the study is Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH (O'Brien, 1971), a Newberry Award winning book selected on the basis of timely plot and theme, development of strong nonstereotyped characters, and vivid description. A collection of unique objects including some oriental articles, a World War II Nazi armband, an unusual necklace, and a mood ring are stimulus objects for initial writing. Students are asked to write a story telling

something about the object, who might have been associated with it, where it might have been found, and what events may have happened around the object. (Veitsch, 1977).

The following Outline presents the procedures followed in the "Listen, Discuss, Write" approach:

Suggested Procedures for Integrating Literature and Composition: Listen, Discuss, Write.

Step One. Initial Writing

1. Overview of the approach.
(Middle school students deserve an honest explanation of the activities and tasks to be undertaken.)
2. Obtain a beginning writing sample or a "starter story". (15-20 minutes)
Suggestion: Use the "Trap Door Method", by Tom Veitsch, (1977), (people, object, situation).
3. Present a synopsis of the literature model.
Suggestion: use filmstrip or film presentation as an overview.

Step Two. Descriptive Writing

1. Review of initial writing.
Identify characters or objects to be described.
2. Ask students to listen for descriptive words (related to senses) actions that characterize the individual work patterns that convey images.
3. Read selected passages related to character or object description.
4. Discussion of author techniques.
5. Relate to a character/object in your story.
6. Write a descriptive passage about your story character/object (15 minutes).
7. Story sharing.

Step Three. Developing the Plot

1. Read passages illustrating the events which precede the plot.
2. Ask students to recall events, identify main event and note the relationship of story parts.
3. Discuss the order of events in their stories. Talk about various strat-

egies for organizing the composition. Discuss the impact of the theme.

4. List the story events and story plot or subplots. (15 minutes)

5. Sharing.

Step Four. Elaborating the Initial Story.

1. Review previous steps taken.

2. Read "model" conclusion and share other story conclusions.

3. Discuss possible conclusions and the need to draw the story to a close after the climax.

4. Write the elaborated story (longer session).

Step Five. Critiquing the Story.

1. Students share stories in dyads or small groups and observe such aspects as vitality, logic, clarity. Changes are suggested.

2. Read story portions to focus on transitional elements, ordering.

3. Use sentence combining and paragraph linking techniques to develop fluency in student story samples.

Step Six. Refining the Vocabulary.

1. Reread literature model portions to focus on vocabulary selection.

2. Brainstorm to generate descriptive and appropriate word choices.

Step Seven. Editing the Elaborated Story.

1. Proof and edit.

2. Present in final polished form-- typed and bound.

3. Share with appropriate audience.

Samples of student writing are gathered, logged, and filed at almost every session. Development of written expression is examined using a holistic scoring method (Myers, 1980) as opposed to primary trait scoring, analytical scoring, or discourse scoring. Holistic scoring, according to Myers, assumes that, "...In a writing assessment students should write, and that error counts alone cannot accurately reflect competency levels." Holistic scoring includes establishing prototypes. Holistic scoring can yield a group profile of students showing the range of writing skill. A sample overtime is needed to make a statement about an individual's writing competency. Criteria for feature analysis are adapted from Myers(1980) and Glazer (1972) and concentrate primarily on the elements of Narrative Composition.

Analysis of Writing Samples.

An examination of three writing samples reflect instruction and discussion directed to description of character and organization of story elements leading to the plot. Early samples become anchor samples for later writing. As might be expected, the wide range of initial writing ability interacts with instruction to present varied individual patterns. Growth appears to be greater for less creative students who are adding new elements to their writing as a result of instruction. Internal logic remains strong throughout and supports the necessity for careful prewriting preparation. The areas of characterization and detail show increased attention in the second writing sample, which followed focused discussion on descriptive writing. Although sentence complexity and use of dialogue vary throughout as a function of individual ability and style, sentence coherence appears to be responsive to instruction.

Short writing periods limit a more detailed analysis at this time. Student writing is just beginning to show evidence of attention to theme; yet most of

the children have discussed thematic aspects of their stories. The short initial samples do not lend themselves to more quantitative analysis of discourse elements, such as T-units, and verb density. Later elaborated samples, may reflect more accurately the continuum of writing growth when compared with earlier samples. Total patterns analyzed holistically over time will add validity to the current assessment of elements of composition.

Discussion

Preliminary assessment of writing samples appear to confirm the procedure of "Listen, Discuss, Write," as a means of fostering the growth of composition skills for the group described. Although greater improvement is shown for less able writers, good writers also appear to profit from targeted discussion of narrative elements. Comments from students reflect a greater awareness of character description in their own composition and in the literature selections chosen for pleasure reading. Requests for extended writing periods followed the outlining of story events and beginning sessions of elaborated writing.

Although the formal critiquing phase has not begun, students are spontaneously sharing ideas and giving each other suggestions, such as names for new characters and places, vocabulary substitutions, etc. Self evaluative comments are increasing and are directed to specific elements; for example, Kemp observed that he should change his main character from a sorcerer to an emperor to be more consistent with the plot and events. Ida decided to rewrite her initial story, keeping the same idea but changing the setting and pattern of events to, "put the story in better order." Peter has concluded that he needs more historical and geographic accuracy in his story; consequently elaborated writing has been curtailed while some library research occurs.

As the sessions continue, students will engage in group interaction for purposes of revision. Spelling, grammar and transitional writing are not being

analyzed at the moment because specific instruction will be directed to those aspects with attention again directed to the model. The focus of this study is on generation of ideas and on understanding narrative elements.

One recommendation for future replications of the study will be to include early attention to developing a "sense of audience." Kroll (1978) and Golden (1980) emphasize the need for experiences which help children to develop awareness of the audience to whom they are writing and to adjust a piece of writing to fit a particular audience. Questions such as, "Who is going to read your story," and "What will be most interesting to them," may give children a better sense of direction during initial writing stages. Interactive group responses also provide opportunities to create audience awareness in writing.

It is anticipated that the "Listen, Discuss, Write" approach will be one way to foster growth in children's writing ability in the middle grades. By combining successful strategies from the teaching of reading and the teaching of writing teachers can help students to grasp the view that communication processes are interrelated and exist in reciprocity to one another.

Scoring Profile for Three Writing Samples

Score Values

1= none
2= little
3= much

Sample I: Initial Writing-- starter story

Sample II: Focus on character description

Sample III: Beginning Elaborated Writing

Table 1.

	Originality			Plot Beginning			Internal Logic			Detail		
	SI	SII	SIII	SI	SII	SIII	SI	SII	SIII	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	3	3	2	1	1
Anne	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	2
Janice	1	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	1
Ida	2	2	2	2	2	3	1	2	3	1	3	3
Wayne	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	3
Peter	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	3	3
Blaise	2	2	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Kemp	2	3		3	3		3	3		1	2	

Table 2

	Theme		
	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	1	2	3
Anne	1	2	3
Janice	1	2	2
Ida	3	2	1
Wayne	2	1	3
Peter	2	2	2
Blaise	2	3	3
Kemp	1	2	2

Table 3

	Settings		
	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	1	1	1
Anne	2	2	2
Janice	2	1	3
Ida	2	1	2
Wayne	1	1	2
Peter	3	2	3
Blaise	3	1	1
Kemp	1	2	2

Table 4

Characterization

	SI	SII	SII
Kristen	3	2	2
Anne	1	3	3
Janice	2	2	2
Ida	1	3	1
Wayne	1	3	1
Peter	1	3	2
Blaise	2	2	3
Kemp	2	2	3

Table 5

Sentence Structure

	Complexity				Coherence		
	SI	SII	SIII		SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	2	2	2		3	3	3
Anne	3	2	2		3	2	3
Janice	1	1	1		2	2	3
Ida	1	1	1		1	2	3
Wayne	1	1	2		2	2	3
Peter	3	2	3		2	3	3
Blaise	3	3	3		3	3	3
Kemp	2	2			2	2	

Word Usage (abstract, figurative, names, variety)

Table 6

	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	1	1	1
Anne	3	2	2
Janice	1	3	2
Ida	1	3	2
Wayne	2	2	3
Peter	3	3	3
Blaise	3	3	3
Kemp	3	2	

Dialogue

Table 7

	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	1	1	1
Anne	2	3	3
Janice	1	1	2
Ida	1	1	1
Wayne	1	2	2
Peter	1	1	1
Blaise	3	3	3
Kemp	1	1	

Use of Emotional Qualities and Unusual Elements

Table 8

	SI	SII	SIII
Kristen	3	3	3
Anne	2	3	3
Janice	1	2	2
Ida	3	3	3
Wayne	1	1	1
Peter	3	2	3
Blaise	3	3	3
Kemp	2	2	2

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